**Chapter Eleven Part Two Video Transcript**

Chapter 11 closes with a pressing question. Against the urgency of authoritarian demagogues, political polarization, and climate catastrophe: what's the point of rhetorical studies?

Now, rhetorical critics have an answer, pushing past the techniques of the good men speaking well to study the pragmatic political implications of rhetoric. But what about theorists?

For rhetorical theorists, an answer to that question, what's the point of rhetoric today, is more complicated. Especially because theory, at least in public conversations, is portrayed to be fanciful, abstract, and lofty.

In fact, our exploration has revealed a dynamic and oscillating relationship between theory and practice. As we say, there's nothing as practical as a good theory. We also know that where there are humans, there are humans who have been practicing rhetoric. And where there are humans practicing rhetoric, there are humans trying to discern and collect teachable lessons about effective symbolic influence.

The 2,500-year history of rhetorical theory, stretching all the way back to the ancient Greeks and the Romans, affirms the value of systematic and generalized efforts to explain human symbolic influence beyond a discrete speaker or writer in a discrete historical context. So in other words, theory highlights why rhetorical scholars stay focused on the generalized knowledge production that keeps our larger disciplines and educational institutions relevant, vibrant, and attractive. Theory speaks to the value of rhetoric as a specific academic discipline.

Although rhetoric affirms the goals of other intellectual paradigms, and you've probably noticed this if you've taken classes in history, anthropology, gender studies, sociology, political science. At the same time, the history of rhetoric and the careful study of our methods, norms, and assumptions reveal why rhetoric is irreducible to a practical form of philosophy, for example, or maybe like a less quantifiable study of persuasion.

Instead, rhetorical theory is a discrete, incommensurate, and generative academic discipline, offering a durable contribution to a comprehensive liberal arts education. Another way to say that is I want to assure you as we wrap up our chapter, as we wrap up our textbook, that you are getting your money's worth, the study of rhetorical theory. There is value in it and will continue to be as long as humans are getting together and practicing symbolic influence.

Theory also keeps scholars from limiting their efforts to partisan political outcomes. And this is especially important now, in a moment of just unprecedented political polarization. Theory kind of lifts the rhetorical scholar above the detritus of electoral politics, the noise of politics in American democracy today. Theory lifts us above causal explanations for why a particular candidate won or lost an election. And theory lifts us above the fleeting focus on legislative efficacy, why this bill passed and that bill didn't. Now, this is not to suggest that rhetorical theorists are or should be apolitical without partisan politics. Instead, it's to suggest that rhetorical theory, when it's at its best, lights up the rhetorical landscape affecting the terrain upon which public argument occurs in a way that transcends daily political events. So we want to be able to use theory to explain the landscape or the foundation by which public conversations happen. So going forward, rhetorical theory will only remain vibrant if a new generation can respond nimbly and forcefully to some of the most unprecedented attacks on the foundational assumptions of the rhetorical tradition that we've ever experienced. Today, public argument is too often untethered from rational deliberation, scientific authority, and policy outcomes that, the best way to put it, policy outcomes that are oriented toward the best attainable version of the truth, which used to be so taken for granted isn't necessarily how policy outcomes are measured now. Now, you can imagine there are no simple answers to redress these attacks, and the path towards healthy, more productive public argument is shrouded in uncertainty and mystery and darkness. We don't know the future, but we hope our exploration of the history and theory of rhetoric can inspire and motivate you as you light up the path forward for the next generation.